



Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

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Citation

Potter, Keith. 1974. 'Review of *Sounds and Signs: Aspects of Musical Notation* by Huge Cole'. *Contact*, 8. pp. 28-30. ISSN 0308-5066.

reviews:

books

SOUNDS AND SIGNS: Aspects of Musical Notation, by Hugo Cole

OUP, 1974 (£1.50)

Most books about notation make boring reading. There are studies of the notations of other cultures or ages, practical guides to conventional notation for the composer and copyist, suggestions for a reformed system (older books), often printed privately at the author's expense, as Cole points out), and descriptions of avant garde notations (eg. Erhard Karkeschka's Notation in New Music, recently translated and published by UE, 1972). Some are obviously better, or at least more readable, than others. But, it seems, a book on notation per se cannot help but draw on a welter of boring detail, the glossaries and catalogues of notational practices which have been considered almost their sole function up to now - and which, of course, fulfil the needs of many a scholar, composer or copyist as books of reference.

So it is good to be able to recommend this small volume as an eminently readable general study of notation in music, written by a practical man (a composer - particularly of operas for children - and teacher - author of a beginners' cello method - as well as critic on The Guardian) in a simple, step-by-step, practical way. I can fully endorse the blurb's claim that the book makes "absorbing reading for anyone, from one-finger pianist to composer, who has had to struggle with music as it is written down".

The reason for this does not entirely lie with the author's lucid style, however, but also with his precise viewpoint and choice of subject-matter. Cole chooses to deal with his subject generally - which does not mean that his book is not continually pinpointed with clear-cut simple illustrations of each aspect from real music (which it is). Rather, that a) the period covered is enormous - origins to electronic and avant garde notations - so that a small volume cannot help but be general, and b) that Cole is more interested in the general principles on

which notations are formed, and the ways in which notations reflect the needs and preoccupations of their users, than in a fully comprehensive description of the notations themselves. As Cole says, only avantgardists and ethnomusicologists have concerned themselves with these things in the recent past: a similar approach from a less specialised and committed writer is therefore all the more welcome for the general reader (though John Cage's Notations (Something Else Press, 1967) is not confined to avant garde activities, even if the layout tends to give this impression).

Part One, "The Background", is a short section dealing briefly with the origins and uses of notation and, much more fully, with the psychological problems of communication which notations set up, the contribution notation makes to our attitude to any particular kind of music, the need for flexibility, the denunciation of the idea that a notation has to be fully comprehensive ("The efficiency of a notation (or any directive system) has nothing to do with the completeness with which it 'describes' required sounds or actions", page 15). Cole deals briefly, but efficiently, with the extra-musical ideas that have an important bearing on musical notation (in this he acknowledges the help of Dennis Fry, Professor of Experimental Phonetics at University College, London): this section could, with profit, have been much longer. He has some pertinent things to say about meaningless precision (eg. in Boulez' Structures, Book 1) and some amusing examples to illustrate various points - as he does throughout. Chapter 4 is called "Response: how we read music" not "how to read music" as in the table of contents: the book is not that basic.

Part Two, "The System at Work", forms the major section of the book and after a preliminary "Lines of Approach" deals with each musical parameter in turn, followed by chapters on "Mood, Sense and Silence" (degrees of emphasis, ways of notating silence, what is not said by a notation), "Auxiliary Notations" (conductors' stick notations, analytical and teaching notations - the examples of graphic analysis could more profitably have been related to electronic or avant garde music as a more necessary help) and "Specialist Notations" (ethnomusicologists' notations and the notation of electronic music).

Cole is particularly good on the differences between graphical and non-graphical ways of presenting information, illustrating the differences by reference to road-signs as well as musical notation. He is good, too, on limitations of conventional notation, but his suggestion that only treble and bass clefs should be used in study-scores in the interests of the score-reader is a little surprising: what about all the ledger lines that would result in viola parts, for instance? By failing to check the facts in his use of Henry Cowell's admirable Musical Quarterly survey of the early days of indeterminacy in Western music (page 56), Cole unfortunately

perpetrates the existence of a piece which no longer is: a composition by Feldman for violin and/or viola, woodwind and solo cello called Intersection No.3. This is not the piano piece of that name and the work itself (though actually quoted in this example) cannot now be traced.

In the chapter on time, Cole's witty analogy concerning the limitations of our simple duple time relationships - "we are perpetually in the position of the mother of three who can only buy sponge cakes in packets of two, four or eight and is therefore always short, or left with a residue" (page 59) - will ring true to all those who have struggled to force complex rhythms into a notational system that is frequently too crude for them. Yet he does not mention Cowell's innovation, for instance, in his piano piece Fabric (1917): an ingenious extension of conventional notation through the use of different shaped note-heads for what he then calls sixth-notes, fifth-notes, etc., extending the American terminology. I cannot see that Britten's "Curlew" sign is of any practical value at all; apart from its presumably symbolic value it might as well be replaced by a pause mark. A discussion of the ways in which Britten (in Curlew River and the other church parables), Lutoslawski, Musgrave and others have attempted to combine a degree of vertical freedom with a fully-worked-out idea would have been of more value. The "mobile" concept is not discussed at all.

Part Three, "Today and Tomorrow", contains chapters on literary attitudes, the two opposing paths of twentieth century notational attitudes - towards complete determinacy and indeterminacy - and a thoughtful final chapter entitled "Where Now?". Predictably, this is the part of the book most open to argument, and some of what Cole says about indeterminate notations should not be taken too seriously. Yet much of what he says does make sense - Cole is not an unenlightened man in many respects. The huge areas that remain untouched in this discussion will undoubtedly be tackled by many other writers in due course.

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